

Nance O'Neil

Her Travels and Her Art

BY HELEN FITZGERALD SANDERS



Nance O'Neil.

OF all the younger American actresses there is none, perhaps, of greater interest to Westerners in general, and Californians in particular, than Nance O'Neil. She is to the stage what Frank Norris was to the literature of the West, vital, rugged and full of force. In the acting of Nance O'Neil as in the writing of Norris, one feels the same heroic proportion, and though both are in some respects roughly hewn, it is that very quality which accentuates the native strength of both. The finer shadings are quite lacking; there is absence of detail, just as there is in the desert itself or the mountains. That is why the writer and the actress are at their best when they have to do with elemental intensity. There are times when one wishes for greater self-restraint in both—but back to the desert and the mountains again, to the torrid heat and the thunderstorm, and one says, leave them, then, their passion heat and their heart-storm. Qualities of ability differ and each must

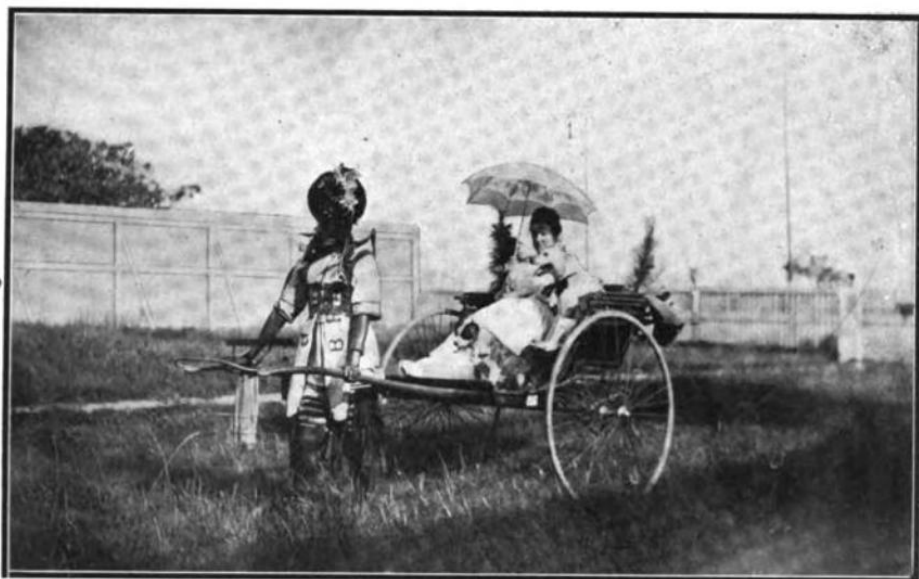
fulfill his peculiar role according to his understanding, be it on the stage of the theatre or on the vaster stage of life.

The call of adventure came to Nance O'Neil when she was yet a child. In the quiet rose garden near Oakland, where she lived with her parents, she was already peering into the outer world, and her child-fancy was taking her out into the Unknown Sea of Romance. From her father, a pioneer of the Golden Age of '49, and her mother, a woman of Southern blood, who crossed the plains in a traveling wagon, she inherited her *wanderlust*, but it was they, also, who clipped the aspiring wing and sought to keep their fledgling safely within the confines of her home. She received her education in the usual way, and graduated from Snell's Seminary in Berkeley. During her stay there teachers and pupils knew of her desire to become an actress and explore the farthest corner of the globe.

One day when McKee Rankin was filling an engagement at the Alcazar Theatre in San Francisco, a very tall, angular, yellow-haired girl, one Gertrude Lamson, presented herself to him armed with a note from Peter Robinson, the dramatic critic of the Chronicle, which ran:

"Here is a young friend of mine who wants to go on the stage. Kindly discourage her."

It seems to be always the fashion to discourage would-be actresses, so McKee Rankin did the conventional thing, said the conventional say about "slavery," "hard work," and so on, and the grave-eyed girl accepted it unquestioningly and persevered. The end of it was, McKee Rankin gave her a small part in a play called "Sara," in which, we are told, she was conspicuously awkward, displaying more elbows than ability. A long tour of little towns followed, and in "The Dan-



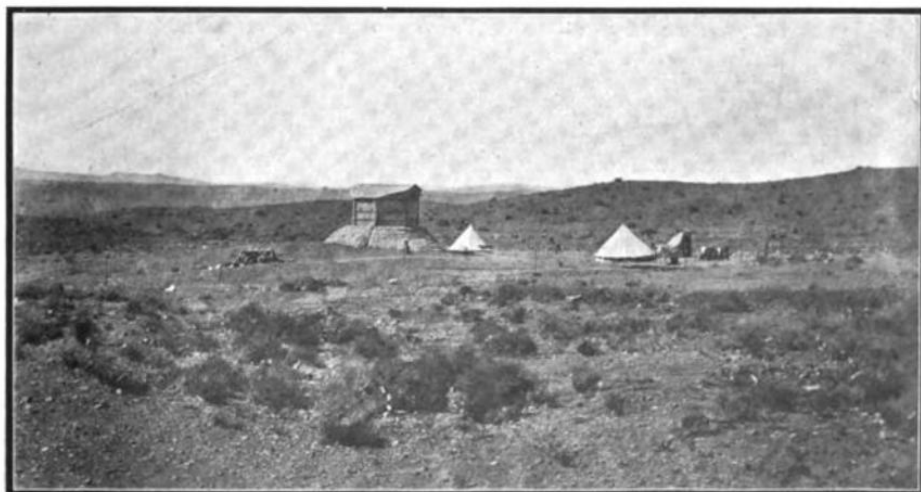
Frank Barney and Nance O'Neill in her native rickshaw, at Durban, South Africa.

ites" she achieved her first success, revealing to her manager a vein of hitherto unguessed ability. For the first time the girl dropped the shackles of artificiality, forgot her play acting, and herself. As she reached her climax, rising above and beyond the learned-by-rote, puppet-like part, her great nature swelled to the heights of newly found power, the audience stamped and cheered in a rage of uncouth enthusiasm, and as the curtain rang down and Rankin rushed up to her crying: "That was great! great!" the

girl, in her naivete, looked at him placidly and asked: "What?"

From this time, Mr. Rankin took the plastic material and began to shape it beneath his trained hand. He was destined to bring out a new star in the theatrical field, and she, his disciple, was to shed light upon his declining years.

McKee Rankin chose for her the stage name of Nance O'Neil, from a combination of Nance Oldfield and Eliza O'Neil, two luminaries of Comedy and Tragedy on the English stage during the eigh-



"Black House" Road from Cape Town to Kimberley in the veldt, South Africa.



Nance O'Neill, Miss Snell, and Tolo having afternoon tea on the veranda at Tyngsboro.

teenth century. In Topeka, Kansas, in the role of Nancy Sikes, a dramatization of Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist," she made her first notable success and established herself as an actress of unusual strength. Henceforth, people began to realize that in this tall, lithe, tawny-haired girl, who moved about with the deliberate ease and grace of a mountain lion of her native California, Tragedy had a new and sincere exponent; and as she dared to grasp at deeper and more serious work, such as Sudermann's "Magda," and other plays of intensity rather than hysterically emotional dramas, the critics appreciated that she had capacity for expansion and development. Her success spread; it was confined to no single locality or community. London viewed her with approval through its monocle, and that led to the project of a season in Australia. Nat Goodwin had failed dismally there, owing, perhaps, to the Australian lack of humor, so the critics and the wisemen looked with pity upon the adventurous spirit of this girl who, Alexander-like, wept for more audiences to conquer. Quite contrary to the

predictions of the aforesaid critics and wisemen (as is not infrequently the case) Miss O'Neil, with her tragic muse, roused the Australians to enthusiasm, and like most people hard of conquest, once won, they become proportionately loyal. They understood her better than Goodwin. As the gloomy, wronged and finally heroic Magda, she stirred their sympathy and bound them to her forever with ties of enduring friendship. She also played "Camille"—an idealized, love-sufficient Camille—"Elizabeth, Queen of England" and others. Having won her laurels there, a tour of the world was projected and carried out.

From Australia she went to New England, playing first in Auckland thence to Roturua, in the Hot Lake district. Verily, the old-time *wanderlust* of the rose garden was becoming a reality. The golden key of Fame was opening for her the closed doors, and the people, anxious to do her homage, were bestowing upon her privileges denied the unknown traveler. So they took her back into the interior, a day's journey through rich, tropical jungles, dark with a tangle of

fern and palm, into the wonderland of New Zealand.

Mr. Don, who is in control of all resorts in that district, had Mr. Alfred Warbrick and Maggie Papakura, the Moori guides in the Government service, take Miss O'Neil to the Hotte at Waka to see the poi-poi dance of the natives, given in her honor. But the crowning event was the ceremony of soaping the great geyser at Rotorua. This geyser is no longer naturally active, and only by artificial means does the vast volume of water issue forth and play like a giant fountain. Upon this occasion the board-covering which protects it from vandal tourists was removed; hundreds of people gathered to witness the phenomenon, and Miss O'Neil, standing over the crater, held a bag filled with pieces of soap. At a given signal, she dropped this into the crater. Out of the breathless silence of expectation came a hollow rumbling, giving evidence of subterranean disturbance. In ten minutes little jets spurted up, gradually increasing until the crowd fell back. In twenty minutes a fan-shaped

body of water and mist rose to the height of 500 feet, shimmering silvery-white, and reflecting the prismatic colors like a huge rainbow.

The young American had scored another triumph, and from Government officials to the simple, sweet-natured natives, all bowed to this new, foreign genius. Touching evidence of their devotion was given when she bade them farewell. Maggie, the guide and her followers, scattered garlands in her path, and saw her fairly launched on her voyage. Nor was this all; the faithful Maggie sent a postal after her across the sea, directed to: "Miss Nance O'Neil, great American actress, San Francisco," wishing her in limited English, but unlimited friendship, "God speed."

The objective point was now South Africa. At that time the country was in the throes of the Boer War. While Miss O'Neil was in Cape Town, martial law was declared, and she set out to Kimberly, traveling in an armored train, dispensing books, soap, matches and other comforts to the soldiers in the block



Nance O'Neil and "Tolo," her maid, at Tyngsboro.

houses along the line. Oblong patches enclosed in white fences, scattered over the monochrome of the veldt, told the story of many a life yielded up in the bloody cause. The deplorable condition of the men suggested a series of benefits for the Soldiers' Christmas Comforts Fund, begun at Cape Town, where Governor, Mayor and other officials paid her the compliment of their presence. This was the first matinee ever given in South Africa, and at the end of the third act of "Magda," the play chosen for the occasion, the Governor presented her with a bouquet tied with the colors of the city. The itinerary included Durban, Port Elizabeth, East London, Pieter Marietsburg, and contemplated Johannesburg, but the latter place, being under strictest martial law, and threatened with siege, Lord Kitchener sent her a letter expressing his regret that no one could be permitted to enter the city.

In Egypt, Miss O'Neil spent her vacation on the desert about the great pyramids, where she climbed the tomb of

Cheops. In Cairo she played before the Khedive, who summoned her to his box to show his Oriental appreciation of Occidental achievement.

During these journeys through many lands, sounding the heart strings of many different people and finding them, for the most part, one in human sympathy, Nance O'Neil had grown and broadened; the sharp angles of undeveloped physical youth and undeveloped mental shading, had given place to riper maturity, and when, once more, she stood upon her native soil, with world-wisdom instead of the old-time world-longing, and eyes that had looked far over the seas and seen, not only the shadows and the sun, but the greater mystery that lies beyond, she had more than fulfilled her early promise.

She now essayed to play "Macbeth," the highest mark at which she has yet aimed. At all times, Shakespeare must be the ultimate criterion, and to the actor or actress who can reincarnate before us his immortal lines, laurels and re-



Home of Nance O'Neil on the St. Kilda Road, Melbourne, Australia.



"Tolo" in her native dress, and "Togo" on the veranda at Tyngsboro.

flected immortality! With this addition to her repertoire, Nance O'Neil went to Boston, where singularly enough, in spite of her travels and her successes, she was but little known. In an obscure theatre she made her bow to the ever critical eyeglasses and blue stockings, and even Boston thawed and discovered her all over again with much self-congratulation. "Magda," "Hedda Gabler," "Camille," etc., were played to filled houses, and Nance O'Neil was lifted out of her humble environment and hustled up town to the heart of the theatrical world.

Among the literati who became her enthusiastic followers was Thomas Bailey Aldrich, the poet, who wrote for her the play "Judith," founded upon the medieval drama of Giocommetti. This theme has already inspired one of his most serious poems, but admiration for the genius of Miss O'Neil caused him to cast it into new form for her. "Judith" was pro-

duced under auspicious circumstances for the first time in Boston, at the Tremont Theatre, on October 14th, 1904, and is said to be one of her strongest roles. This was the only instance in recent times of an American poet writing a play for an American actress.

In her thirteen years on the stage, Nance O'Neil has done much. Still she leaves much to be desired, not so particularly in the doing, as in what she chooses to do. Here one must revert to the analogy of Frank Norris, the writer, and Nance O'Neil, the actress. Both have chosen some strange vehicles for their powers. Norris was often simply coarse from deliberate choice; Nance O'Neil too often wasted her splendid gifts on plays that have no place in the world of Morals or Art. The muck rake is an implement of great popularity; we use it on a large scale in politics and public life; we keep one gilded and tied with blue ribbons

(metaphorically, of course), in our charming little parlors, to rake society over, and incidentally our neighbors and acquaintances. Literature and the Stage, which merely mirror life, have raked and raked until they often have a very unpleasant odor. But we hold our aesthetic noses, and so long as there is an object to be gained, an internal regeneration through purging, we stand it cheerfully. Thus in "Magda," the subject of the

and Miss O'Neil is admirable in the part. Maeterlink's "Monna Vanna," on the other hand, is pernicious and unclean. Subtle, an overburdened and misused word, is often too synonymous with putrid. One condemns the play, and back comes the retort: "Oh, but Maeterlink is so subtle!" Possibly this is true, but when he chooses to picture a wife who dupes, fools and betrays a devoted husband, driven to frenzy by the supposed



Kaffirs in the compound at the Diamond mines, playing on the Kaffir piano.

play is manifestly unpleasant; there is a great deal of storming and sinning and the usual illegitimate child. "Magda," however, through this same child and the uplifting influence of her art, rises, spurns her cowardly betrayer, who would marry her after her triumphs, if she would but deny their child, and faces the world with the boy who is at once her downfall and her salvation. "Magda" is a moral play; it is almost a great play.

sacrifice of her chastity, out of unholy love for another man, subtilty and the violation of the seventh commandment are to all essential purposes the same. The play is absolutely without justification from a superficial, moral or artistic standpoint. Superficially it is not even pleasing; morally one feels the need of fumigation after witnessing it; artistically it is a failure, full of technical faults, tedious harangues, climaxes over-



Front view of Mera House Hotel, Gizeh.

worn to the point of staleness, and, without, an ending which leaves the spectator in a state of complete disgust and mental nausea. Miss O'Neil plays the part well. There is no fault in her acting, save the fault of acting it at all, for paradoxical as it may sound, the better such a play is acted, the worse it is.

We have said such productions as this have no place in the world of Morals or of Art; we may go farther and say they have no place in the lighter World of Amusement. The playhouse is primarily a place of amusement, secondarily a place of education and art, the latter and finer phases being the outgrowth of the first, which is elemental. Therefore, when a drama does not amuse, uplift nor educate, it fails completely.

The same criterion applies to the various forms of Art, Sculpture, Literature and the Stage. The ultimate aim of each

is to reflect and express life truly, or ideally. Take, for instance, the sculptor; one who would choose hunch-backs, abortions and reptiles for models, rather than strive to depict the varying degrees of force, beauty or another of the vital elements, would surely misuse his gift. The hunchback, the abortion and the reptile may have their places, as the snake in the heroic "Laocoon," but it serves merely to bring forth a masterpiece of human agony. So in Literature and on the Stage the horrible, the evil, the lewd, must be a means to an end, and the end must be exalting. One gets tired of the ordinary, purposeless vulgarity of thought, talk and action which end in the debauchery of crime in Norris's "McTeague," and on the stage the omnipresent courtesan of the type of Camille, Zaza, Sappho and the rest, is unoriginal, hackneyed and monotonous. But much more pernicious



A South African servant.



Servant in Durban.



Nance O'Neil, Mr. Alfred Warbriek (a Government guide) and friend, standing in front of Maori grass house.

is the whitened sepulchre in the form of "Monna Vanna."

We have spoken of these two plays, "Magda" and "Monna Vanna," because we are familiar with the actress's interpretation of them. Of her "Lady Macbeth," this is not the case, and it is never fair to criticise from a criticism.

Nance O'Neil is a gifted woman, and she is, moreover, a young woman who has hardly reached the climax of productive maturity. She is a potent factor on the modern stage who may exert a wide influence for better or worse. Physically she is possessed of unusual beauty, charm and magnetism. She is essentially a magnificent animal. Her yellow hair falls in heavy masses like the ripe ears of corn of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel," her skin is white, her eyes clear blue, her features nobly mod-

eled. Her throat like a column of Parian marble is a fit indication of her deep voice, and in semblance, at least, she is of unmixed Saxon blood. She is a creature built on the heroic scale, fit for the embodiment of heroic parts; therefore it is a double pity that she should waste her gifts both physical and mental on plays unworthy of them. She is splendidly fit for "Cleopatra." The voluptuous beauty and fascination of the Egyptian Queen would be nicely suited to her. She would also make a noble "Guinevere." This leads to reminiscence, coupled with a desire. While Miss O'Neil was in Australia, the present Lord Tennyson, son of the poet, gave her permission to play any of his father's poems adapted to the stage. Such plays as could be made from "Idylls of the King," enacted by such an artist as Miss O'Neil, would be a tonic to modern Art as well as a joy to the whole English-speaking, poetry-loving world.

In her summer home at Tyngsboro, Massachusetts, Nance O'Neil and Mr. Kirk, a young California author, are preparing to produce his new play, "Midias of the Golden Fleece." Beyond the theme suggested by the title, the character of the play is not known. We trust it will be worthy of its interpreter.

"The Master doth not genius vainly give,
And Inspiration, like the Soul, doth live."

So may it be with Nance O'Neil, and though we are told the actor, unlike the poet or the sculptor, leaves behind him nothing but memory, still Memory is Immortality.

October

BY EMMA PLAYTER SEABURY

A day born of October and the sun
In silver-tissued glory smiling came,
And touched the leaves and grass with gold anew;
The lake, a dream in lazulean blue
Flashed back the opal tints, and heart of flame,
And from its depths one face, and only one.